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ABSTRACT

Many American colleges and universities that train English majors for careers in secondary schools (Eastern Washington University, for example) expose students to two radically different modes of literature pedagogy. In the majority of courses, literature is approached as artifact and students are instructed in ways to analyze literary text, with particular attention devoted to texts that exemplify "the best that is known and thought in the world." Teacher-centered class sessions devote time to discovering common meaning in texts and developing literacy competency. In English methods courses, however, students are exposed to another model wherein the teacher's major responsibility is to help students find personal connections with texts and trust their own experiences. A study where teachers, students, and administrators were surveyed and graduate secondary English majors were interviewed found the "literature as artifact" approach dominated the classrooms of recent graduates and experienced teachers alike; however, teachers were also using a wide variety of activities such as free writing and reading logs which encouraged personal responses to reading instead of literary analysis. Recent graduates reported they would like to allow students more freedom in interpreting literary texts but are not comfortable breaking with the generally accepted model for fear of being stigmatized as radicals. (NH)

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Literature as Expression--Literature as Artifact: Which Pedagogy Did Our English Teachers Choose?

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This paper, which was presented at the 1993 NCTE Spring Conference in Richmond, focuses on a situation that is common to many American colleges and universities that train English majors for careers in secondary schools. At Eastern Washington University--a regional university near Spokane whose role and mission statement identifies teacher education as one of its top priorities--students in the English Department's teacher-training program for secondary majors are exposed to two radically different models of literature pedagogy. In the majority of the courses they take, literature is approached as artifact. (Of the many researchers to describe this teaching model as "literature as artifact," one of the most recent is Ann Ruggles Gere in *Language and Reflection*, 85-112.) In these courses they are instructed in ways to analyze literary texts, with particular attention to texts that exemplify "the best that is known and thought in the world." Class sessions are often teacher-centered, with secondary majors, under the teacher's authority and guidance, devoting much of their class time to discovering common meanings in texts and developing their literary competence. Additionally, the analytical, literature-as-artifact approach is complemented in Eastern's program by a number of linguistically oriented courses in which students are encouraged to break language down into pieces and examine relationships between parts. In their English methods courses, however, they are exposed to another model. Here they read authors like Louise Rosenblatt, Nancie Atwell, Steven Tchudi, Lucy Calkins, and the Goodmans, all of whom approach literature as expression and argue for a student-centered classroom in which the teacher's major responsibility is to help students to find personal connections with texts and to trust their own experiences.

Given the fact that both of these models are well represented in the English Department's secondary program, the question that began to interest several of us who taught the methods courses were the following ones: (1) Which of the approaches, if either, did our students absorb and put into practice in their own classrooms? (2) Did they, perhaps, absorb and attempt to apply both? If so, what success were they having in

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approaching literature from such seemingly contradictory perspectives? (3) Did we, in fact, find *any* consistent theory about literature underpinning the classroom practices of our graduates? Or had they adopted a "reactive" pedagogy, using whatever approach worked best in their own classrooms? (4) How important were other factors--e.g., state and/or district guidelines, class sizes, pressures from other teachers, community standards, etc.--in determining their approach to literature. (5) What were the implications of the answers to these questions for our secondary English program?

To answer these questions, we interviewed teachers, students, and state and local administrators; observed and taught lessons in local secondary classrooms; and conducted a statewide survey of all secondary English majors who had graduated from Eastern during the last five years. Our research yielded us the following answers to the above questions.

The approach that we found dominating the classrooms of our recent graduates and experienced teachers alike was literature as artifact. Over 80% of our recent graduates reported that they had "come to teach" from that perspective. With experienced teachers, the figure was closer to 90%. Follow-up interviews with teachers and classroom observations led us to advance several reasons for the popularity of this approach.

First, as Gere and others observe, the approach affords "flexibility"; specifically, it "allows teachers to incorporate many elements from other approaches, making possible the kind of eclecticism that is crucial in developing an individual teaching style" (98). Gere's appraisal squares perfectly with what we observed in classrooms and heard teachers telling us in interviews: that this approach gave them structure and substance upon which to build their own lessons and--particulalry in the case of new graduates--evolve their own teaching style. To use a metaphor, we found the literature-as-artifact tree standing solidly in the middle of most English classrooms, but on its branches teachers had hung a wide variety of activities, many of them,like free writing and reading logs, activities that struck us as more consistent with other approaches, ones that encouraged personal responses to readings instead of literary analysis.

Second, teachers reported that this was the model that the district SLOs required and that parents expected. Intrigued by the first explanation, we turned to the local language arts guidelines, but a close reading of these documents failed to confirm the teachers' perceptions. In fact, the guidelines we examined were so broad that they provided an umbrella for virtually any approach to literature a teacher chose, though they did specify certain content that had the be covered.

Perhaps most importantly, as our recent graduates learned during their student-teaching experience, literature as artifact was the approach that they would be expected to implement when and if they got their own classroom. This realization served as something

of a reality check to our students, who quickly came to understand that if they were to get a teaching job in the Spokane area, which is the tightest job market for public school teachers in Washington, they would have to adopt the party line on English methodogy. Not surprisingly, the first priority for our majors was getting a job, not challenging the status quo. In a very important sense, then, they *had* adopted a reactive pedagogy, some of them consciously, most of them unconsciously.

Finally, many of our recent graduates, as well as some veteran teachers, reported that they weren't really comfortable with the artifact approach--that they would like to teach in a less teacher-centered classroom, to allow students more freedom in interpreting literary texts, and to spend less time teaching iambs and symbolism---but they would not feel comfortable breaking with the generally accepted model and taking the chance of being stigmatized as a radical. For our new graduates, such stigmatization was the fate they feared most because it carried with it the implication that, on the one hand, they were not team players and, on the other, that they considered themselves better than their more experienced colleagues.

As to the implications of our findings for our secondary English program, the research revealed that very few of our students, unhappily, are given the opportunity in the field to apply more than one method of teaching literature. To be sure, the artifact approach was the one that was philosophically congenial to some of our students, so their field experiences merely reinforced a method they had already chosen. But many of our students reported feeling balked in their attempt to implement approaches that were more expressive and less teacher- and text-centered. Some of them felt frustrated, even angered, by the concessions that the so-called "real world" of secondary teaching forced them to make.

Proceeding from the assumption that not only our own students but all English teachers should be given the opportunity to employ more than one approach to literature, we decided that an important first step in effecting this change was to get teachers and administrators talking about the situation. Specifically, we wanted teachers to identify (not, at this stage, defend or justify) the method they favored in teaching literature; in the case of language arts coordinators, we wanted them to identifty the approach to literature that provided the underlying assumptions, or rationale, for their language arts curriculum. To this end, we plan to meetings with teachers and administrators to discuss this important issue, focusing particularly on the districts in which language arts curricula are currently being revised. Our hope is that once teachers and administrators begin to analyze and discuss their approach, they will begin to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses, as well the wisdom of teaching literature from *any* single perspective.

Works Cited

Gee, Ann Ruggles, et al., *Language and Reflection: An Integrated Approach to Teaching English*. New York: Macmillan, 1992.